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SUBJECT: Uzbekistan: Anti-Corruption Workshop Launches UN Convention
Implementation Efforts

REF: TASHKENT 257

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11. (SBU) Summary: The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), with funding support from the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), conducted a workshop on March 31 - April 1 on implementation of the UN Convention Against Corruption. International experts, including from the U.S. Department of Justice, presented how key concepts of the convention are implemented elsewhere to an audience of Uzbek government officials. Deputy Prosecutor General Alisher Sharafutdinov highlighted Uzbekistan's 2008 decision to adopt the convention and made frank statements about the negative impact of corruption in Uzbekistan, the first time we have heard a high-ranking official even acknowledge the existence of corruption. The Ambassador also took the opportunity to point out the likely role of corruption in the country's currency conversion and liquidity woes. Recent press reports suggest that Uzbekistan is cracking down on egregious examples of corruption committed by its officials and taking its new international obligations seriously. End summary.

New Anti-Corruption Project Underway

12. (U) On March 31-April 1 the UNODC Regional Office in Central Asia launched a new anti-corruption project with a high-profile workshop event involving Uzbek officials and numerous international experts. Approximately USD 300,000 (50 percent of the budget) is being provided by INL rule of law assistance funds, for which UNODC regional head James Callahan thanked the U.S. Embassy in his opening remarks. The project is designed to promote effective implementation of the U.N. Convention Against Corruption, which Uzbekistan adopted in July 2008. A visiting trial attorney from the U.S. Department of Justice was among the guest speakers, and his presentation about asset forfeiture was well received.

Strong Statement by Deputy Prosecutor General

13. (U) Representatives of 12 key Uzbek government agencies were represented in the audience, led by Deputy Prosecutor General Alisher Sharafutdinov, who is known for his unusual candor but had kept a low public profile since his promotion from Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs last year. In his opening remarks, Sharafutdinov acknowledged that "corruption is impeding the normal functioning and efficiency of our national economy" and added that it "disrupts the image" and "is a threat to the security of

Uzbekistan." Therefore, he continued, "ratification of the U.N. Convention will help establish a legal base against corruption and lead to improved legislation to counter this evil." Sharafutdinov's strong public statements were important for the Uzbek contingent to hear as they opened their notebooks to glean experiences from other countries. The Ambassador echoed this in his own opening remarks but also drew a link between corruption and Uzbekistan's currency conversion delays and currency shortage, which is a major concern of the American Chamber of Commerce.

National Action Plan Coming Soon

¶4. (U) Sharafutdinov stated that all government ministries are represented on an anti-corruption working group, which convened for the first time on September 16, 2008 under the chairmanship of the Office of the General Prosecutor. The main short-term goal of the working group is to "devise a strategy for institutions in implementing the fight against corruption," which will be guided by a national action plan. As part of this process, Sharafutdinov noted that the working group is interested in the experiences of other countries, which is why this UNODC event was important. "This will save us from reinventing the wheel," he added. Francesco Checchi, a Bratislava-based official from the UNDP, cautioned the Uzbeks that anti-corruption agencies tend to be plagued by limited resources and few trained staff. Olga Zudova, a former prosecutor and now a Senior Legal Adviser at the Tashkent UNODC office, also warned that those who have profited from corruption have the resources to hire excellent defense teams and are often in a position to apply pressure to well-intentioned

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prosecutors.

Experience of Latvia Strikes a Chord

¶5. (U) Anti-corruption officials and experts from Latvia, Slovenia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, the USA, and international organizations delivered presentations about best practices and lessons learned. Diana Kurpniece, Head of Public Relations at the Latvian Bureau on Preventing and Combating Corruption struck a chord with the Uzbek officials since Latvia was in a similar position as Uzbekistan following the break-up of the USSR. "If you take a rotten apple out of a bunch without changing the system, Kurpniece reported, "then other apples will also go rotten." She cited the widening gulf between the two former Soviet republics on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, which in 2000 rated Latvia 3.4 and Uzbekistan 2.4. Yet by 2008 Latvia had climbed to a 5.0 -- admittedly still far from a perfect assessment -- whereas Uzbekistan sank further to a dismal 1.8. One Kyrgyz audience member took good-natured exception to the two countries' similarities, noting that Baltic people are more inherently rule abiding than Central Asians "such that when the light turns red in Riga people stop regardless of whether no one is looking. In Central Asia we would not stop, and this mindset makes it far easier for you to pass a law and expect most people to obey it."

¶6. (U) Kurpniece's advice for Uzbekistan included publishing incomes, which she said is an effective way to promote transparency. Kurpniece also described how Latvia's anti-corruption entity was given a wide mandate and independence while still being accountable to the Cabinet of Ministers. She also highlighted the importance of a total prohibition on gifts -- even small trinkets -- as well as strict rules about moonlighting to prevent anti-corruption officials from having vested interests in entities that could be under their investigative purview. She noted that the Kyrgyz anti-corruption agency had visited Latvia on a study tour and suggested that Uzbekistan consider doing the same.

OECD Invites Uzbekistan to Join Anti-Corruption Network

¶7. (SBU) Olga Savran, an anti-corruption official from the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), told

poloff about a renewed effort to invite Uzbekistan to join the Istanbul Plan, which provides Russian-speaking countries with opportunities for peer review on anti-corruption measures. She noted that Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan are all members but that Uzbekistan has always resisted (Turkmenistan declined based on its neutrality policy). OECD sent a letter to Foreign Minister Norov prior to this event explaining the initiative and encouraging Uzbekistan to join, but in typical Uzbek fashion there was no response. Savran asked the U.S. Embassy to raise this with our Uzbek Government interlocutors and hopefully bring them to the table. (Note: We will indeed raise this when the time is right. End note.)

Kyrgyz Case

¶8. (U) A representative from the Kyrgyzstan Anti-corruption Commission described his country's efforts, noting that there was a new initiative that began in 2005 "after the revolution." Like Uzbekistan, a national action plan was adopted to guide implementation efforts. "We've proven there is political will" to fight corruption, he said, but added that they want to focus more on prevention activities than punishment. He said Kyrgyzstan learned that "some corruption goes away with higher salaries." Nonetheless, he expressed disappointment with the most recent rating by Transparency International but said the President is ready to meet with the organization to discuss it.

Notable Convictions in Uzbekistan

¶9. (U) There have been encouraging indications in the state-controlled press that Uzbekistan is taking its international anti-corruption obligations seriously and not tolerating official corruption. We recently reported that the Governor of Samarkand

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Province was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment for corruption (reftel). In addition, on March 23 a story was published by Interfax News Agency reporting that a corrupt group of policemen which extorted money from citizens through fabricated cases was brought to justice. One accomplice had been sentenced to more than 10 years in prison in 2007, according to the article, and authorities just arrested Abdurauf Boynazarov, a former police investigator in Tashkent Province, who had been in hiding for several years. On April 13 there was article from the reputable website newsuz reporting that a former prosecutor, Fakhriddin Nuriddinov, who led a criminal group that took USD 1,000,000 from 52 victims in Khorezm and Karakalpakstan Provinces, was convicted and sentenced to 15 years in prison. Three accomplices received 11 year sentences and a fourth will be punished with seven years in prison.

Comment:

¶10. (SBU) We are optimistic that this new INL-supported UNODC anti-corruption initiative will help flesh out the anti-corruption framework and ultimately lead into greater awareness of the problem and concrete measures to combat it. As Sharafutdinov summarized, Uzbekistan "is no longer dancing in just one spot, but it is just at the beginning of a long road." Corruption will not disappear overnight, but a serious effort to implement the U.N. Convention Against Corruption is a step in the right direction. The U.S. financial support for the project also provides us with another avenue for engagement on rule of law issues.

BUTCHER